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ABSTRACT

Although to speak of achieving the ideal writing center is to entertain a most romantic notion, there are steps that can be taken to improve the quality of a college or university writing center. The mission of the writing center, which may vary from school to school, must be clearly established. The organization of the center should be examined. The simpler the internal organizational structure of the writing center, the more smoothly and efficiently it will operate. Thus, one administrator, mature and well-prepared tutors, and adequate financial compensation will create a more effective center. Appropriate facilities and tutorial materials as well as computers, must also be examined. One final factor to consider is the responsibility of the faculty to the writing center. Ultimately, the mission of the writing center should be understood: to teach students writing skills. (DF)

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# Achieving the Ideal Writing Center by Establishing the Role of the Writing Center Within the College or University

To speak of achieving the ideal writing center is to entertain a most romantic notion. The romantic ideal is only achieved in the remote past or future, or in some distant land or sphere. In ancient Greece we read that the ideal was achieved by the shepherd and his equally rustic lady in green, solitary pastures. In medieval Europe and England, it was achieved by the jousting knights and their fair ladies. But anyone who has been a shepherd or a shepherd's lady, anyone who has visited in wintertime those castles inhabited by the medieval knights and ladies will know that there is more to the story than was recorded. There are in reality no such pastures occupied by sheep free of lanolin and ticks. The shepherd's straw bed was hard and crawling with vermin. The food he ate with such relish was simple, of little variety, and prepared with difficulty with primitive utensils and few condiments. Both the knight and lady likely suffered from severe headcolds and chilled feet while either lanquishing of love or feasting in the drafty castles: particularly the knight, clothed as he was in an icy coat of mail and iron armor must have experienced distracting realities. As it is with the ancient shepherds and the medieval knights, so it is with ideal writing centers. There is no such entity. The center will never be free of its lanolin and ticks, its drafts and chilled armor. Still, some of the rustic and primitive features can be eliminated to suit modern conditions. It is

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about the elimination of the ticks and lanolin in our ideal writing centers that I plan to speak.

The Mission of a Writing Center

The mission of a writing center, quite simply stated, is to improve the writing skills of students and perhaps faculty and staff across campus. Most traditional classroom teachers would likely disagree with me when I say that the writing center is the best established academic institution for accomplishing that mission. In making that statement I am not so radical as to advocate that the writing center replace the classroom and become the writing institution. The classroom also has its significant role in the teaching of writing skills. I perceive that the best teaching of writing occurs when a fine classroom teacher recognizes that the theory he teaches in class is often not understood, is misinterpreted, or goes wrong in the students' application. The writing center, a forum of writing specialists, has the advantage of addressing the weaknesses and strengths in the individual student's perception of the writing process while the student is involved and interested in the writing process. There isn't time for that individual attention in the classroom, and the teacher's comments on the students' finished product come after the students' interest in the writing assignment as a learning experience has flagged. It is in the creation of that finished product that the students' interest in the writing process is piqued.

Individual teacher-student consultations--if the teacher had the time--might replace the role of the writing center, but even here, the writing center may have the edge. The student who has a good understanding of the teacher's expectations will benefit from instruction from a second writing specialist, the tutor. This second contact has the advantage of confirming in the students' minds that the principles taught by their teacher are considered important by all writing teachers. The tutor shares his individual approach to the complex writing process and has a broadening effect on the students' own perception. In the classroom the teacher focuses on broad significant writing concepts. Minor and individual writing concerns are usually not taught. In the writing center the minor and personal writing concerns are detected and addressed. I might add that some of these concerns which teachers consider minor concerns are major obstacles to the struggling student. And whereas the teacher likely has teaching of writing as at least his secondary interest, the teaching of the writing process is the primary purpose and interest of the personnel in the writing center. The student is likely to encounter more enthusiasm for the glories of writing from the unjaded minds of young tutors in the writing center than from his teacher who endures the student visit, but would rather be pursuing his literary or language interests. Often a comradery develops between a tutor and a student that is lacking in the traditional teacher-student consultation. When a student observes that one of his peers has

achieved competence in writing, he is more likely to respond to the challenge to strengthen his own writing skills. When a student observes that a peer has mastered the skill of writing, he is encouraged that mastery is achievable. There is an implication that if the peer has achieved, the student has been negligent. The student observes that mastery is achieved by diligent work rather than by patience or age. Of course, not all students make these associations, but some do. Still another advantage the writing center usually has over the teacher is that because the writing center has as its primary role the teaching of writing skills, it usually has superior supplementary teaching aids.

Volumes might be written or spoken about the mission of writing centers, and I acknowledge that since the writing process is complex, that since the expectations of faculty and administration and the abilities, ages, and preparation of students vary from one learning institution to another, so will the mission of writing centers vary. Some of our centers are centers of remediation, some emphasize grammar, usage, mechanics, and ESL, some are direct appendages of the classroom, most are centers promoting rhetoric. Most of our centers vary in practice from the vague visions of administrators and faculty not directly involved in center practicum. To those of us who are involved, there is an inherent charge to interact positively with administrators, faculty, and students: share our visions of innovation, our successes, our capabilities to assist them in their own

missions, and our unique and remarkable capabilities for teaching students the complex skills and art of written communication. Where our visions vary from theirs, we must maintain a positive perspective, persuade and encourage them to our purpose, be willing on occasion to compromise. In short, the ideal writing center evolves when an active writing center administrator educates and persuades his colleagues, administrators and the students of the quality and the necessity of the writing center services.

Organizational Structure of the Writing Center

I've already stated that the mission of a writing center is to improve the writing skills of students, faculty, and staff. If that is to happen, attention must be given to the organizational structure of the center. There is in practice a variety of organizational and financial structures. Some are part of a larger learning center conglomerate housed in one facility. Some are paired with a companion reading center. Most often the writing center exists as a single entity. Some report directly to a vice president over student services. Some are attached to an academic department--usually English. There are advantages and disadvantages to be considered in all of the above arrangements. If the writing center is part of a larger learning conglomerate, there is the possibility that the financial and physical facility needs (and there are always those) will be subordinated to the needs of some other learning center housed in

the facility--particularly if the director of the facility is insensitive or unfriendly to the needs of the writing center. Also there are distractions and often conflicts when the writing center shares facilities as part of a larger learning conglomerate. However, there are advantages. Students who come for help in math or study skills are exposed to the services also of the writing center. Students associate the writing center with other learning experiences they've had elsewhere in the center and return after help in another academic learning center within the conglomerate for assistance in the writing center because of past associations. Financially, being part of a conglomerate reporting directly to a vice president may even have advantages. With such direct reporting, the funds come directly to the learning center. Competition for those funds within a learning center conglomerate may be less competitive than if the writing center is joined to an academic department.

I manage a writing center that is paired with a reading center. The two are in separate rooms joined by a short hallway. Most of the tutors have trained in both centers. I discover that those who have been trained in both reading and writing skills are better tutors in tutoring both skills. Although for the most part the teaching of reading skills differs from teaching writing skills, the two complement each other. Generally speaking, the tutor who has been trained to teach reading skills is more sensitive to the structure of writing, more aware of effects through inference, more aware of the

effects of understatement and overstatement, more aware of the writer's bias and purpose.

Where the writing center is attached directly to the English Department, there is the inherent danger I've mentioned above that financially the writing center needs may be placed low on departmental priorities. However, I've discovered, having worked in a center that was part of a learning conglomerate and lately joined directly to the English Department that there are advantages to being linked directly to English. The best and worst faculty support to a writing center generally comes from the English Department. When the English faculty perceive that the writing center is an extension of their own discipline, they are more likely to support it and at least through discourse lessen their opposition.

Since the writing center is a relatively new institution, it is generally dependent on some other more firmly established learning institution. That being the case, writing center administrators usually have little control over their budget and often only moderate control over the nature of their services. Therefore, for most of us the achievement of the ideal writing center may lie in the future. I anticipate that there is an inherent tension in the administrative structure of the ideal writing center. While the administrator should seek as much independence as possible over budget and determination of nature of services, there should not be so much independence that he or she becomes insensitive to the needs and wants of higher admini-

stration, of faculty and students. Perhaps the ideal arrangement is one in which the writing center is attached to the English Department, receives financial and mission support, but has an independent, guaranteed budget which he or she can administer personally. Such an arrangement would give the administrator the flexibility for innovation and freedom to direct mission emphasis while encouraging support and positive interaction between the center and English Department administration, faculty, and students.

Internal Organizational Structure

The simpler the internal organizational structure of the writing center, the more smoothly and efficiently it will operate. Too many administrators making decision about writing center policy and mission produces contention and poorly defined purpose. Therefore, I recommend that there only be one administrator in the writing center. That, of course, places heavy responsibility on one person, but I believe that the resulting unity of operation and direction outweighs the burden. The administrator should be a skilled rhetorician and teacher, should be a competent administrator. He or she should have an effective tutor recruiting and training program, should have a good rapport with the tutors. He should have tenured faculty status so that he has the respect of his academic colleagues. Not giving writing center directors tenure is a flaw in many of our current writing centers and is certainly an obstacle to achieving the

ideal writing center.

Another important concern of internal organization is the maturity and preparation of the beginning tutor. In the college writing center there are a variety of practices. Some centers are less discriminating and employ lower division students, even freshmen. There is an advantage in this, of course, because that increases the probability that once trained, the tutor will be available for employment for a longer time. Depending on the performance of the tutor, that may or may not be a benefit. Other centers employ only upper division or graduate students. The advantage of doing so is apparent. Such students are likely to be more experienced and mature. The disadvantage, of course, is that tutors from these ranks will serve shorter terms of employment, may even not fully develop their tutorial capabilities. Personally, I think the ideal writing center should employ more mature tutors and compensate for short employment terms with a strong continuous training program.

Still another concern of the internal structure of the writing center is the financial issue. The ideal writing center will never be achieved until center administrators and tutors are fairly compensated for their work or until the staff is large enough to accommodate all who come for assistance. The quality of service a writing center provides is directly related to the morale of the staff. While there are many factors that affect center morale, certainly one of the chief contributors to staff disharmony and apathy is inadequate compensation. A review of

the current pay scales for writing center personnel across the country shows that most are drastically underpaid. I don't even ask that the financial compensation for the ideal writing center be ideal; it would be a moral boost to receive equity. The ideal writing center will never be achieved until this issue is addressed.

Writing Center Facilities and Materials

I don't mean to become militant in my remarks. I recognize that the writing center is a relatively new academic institution and is in the process of establishing its place in academia. Some of our direct supervisors now recognize the value of our service and support us and compensate us as fairly and extensively as they can with their limited resources. One of the most important resources to be considered is the writing center's physical facility. Again, because writing centers are a relatively new academic institution, many of our facilities are less than adequate. There is neither adequate space, configuration of space, nor placement of the facility for the students' convenience. I hope that shortly, as our institution gains greater acceptance, that the space will be adequate, attractively designed and furnished, and strategically placed near the hub of the university--perhaps within the library or near the English Department. The facilities should be designed for tutorial conferencing, ideally should have a second room to be used for tutor training, diagnostic testing, and group tutorials. The

space should be large enough to house all who come for assistance.

A second resource to be considered is tutorial materials. A recent contributor to The Writing Lab Newsletter stated that he is finding less and less use for printed materials--in fact advocated that they were no use at all.[1] I don't know if that is his genuine feeling, but I suggest that just the opposite should be the case. I agree with his sentiments--that our tutors are our best resource. Printed materials will never replace the tutor. However, why should a writing center limit its teaching capabilities by banning or limiting writing aids? Although most students limit themselves to a live tutorial, some prefer individual research in texts, specially prepared writing aids, and sample student papers. Some more mature students seek writing assistance both from tutors and printed materials. A good writing center library is also a resource for tutors to discover answers to writing questions they encounter in tutorials and deepen their own understanding of the writing process. I personally challenge my tutors to read at least one rhetoric, handbook or reader each semester. My tutors report that they find themselves using their books as tutorial aids and that principles they learn find direct application in the writing principles they teach.

Finally, no discussion of writing center materials would

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[1] Richard D. Vick, Writing Lab Newsletter Vol. IX, No. 3 (November 1984) pp. 8-9.

be complete without a discussion of computers, how they have already revolutionized our writing centers and their potential for effectively assisting in teaching the writing process. Already the word processing capabilities with their easy revision features are prompting students to more thoughtful and more polished papers.

Furthermore, some genuinely helpful programs and systems capable of teaching meaningful writing principles are available now. I mention four: Writer's Workbench, Alps, Grammatik, and Wanda. There are more, and we can anticipate even more. While tutors will remain to be the chief means for teaching writing skills in the writing center, we can anticipate that the computer will play an increasing role and will do some things better than a human can. The computer will not replace tutors but will aid and supplement them.

## Responsibility of the Faculty to the Writing Center

There is, despite writing center administrators' insistence to the contrary, an inherent friction between the center and the faculty who teach or (as is often the case) simply assign writing. The writing center has as its mission a goal of improving the writing skills of students and perhaps faculty and staff across the campus. The faculty has, generally speaking, the goal of testing students' writing skills through their assignments. Hence they often resent the interference of a writing center where their students will receive assistance that

will likely improve the students' performance. That is a legitimate concern. Another source of friction is frequently discovered when the student commences his/her tutorial. It is by no means uncommon for a student to have misunderstood the teacher's writing assignment. It is by no means uncommon for a student to misrepresent the teacher's writing assignment--particularly when that student is already into a second or third draft when he/she brings a paper to the writing center for assistance. Having committed that much energy to the assignment, the student wants the teacher's assignment to match what he/she has written. It is by no means uncommon either that students represent only too clearly their teacher's ineptitude or total lack of direction when making writing assignments. We cannot excuse the teacher for this breach of professionality, but we should not be surprised when we encounter his resentment. None of us likes to have his faults exposed.

Lest I appear to be overly biased in my observations, let me also suggest that in some instances the personnel in the writing center may be at fault. Because the tutor likely was not present when the teacher made the assignment, there is a natural communication gap that invites misrepresentation of the assignment. Only an occasional teacher commutes a writing assignment to paper. So usually the tutor only has what the student has already written or what the student reports are his teacher's expectations for the assignment. Our tutors, good as they are, are most often peer tutors relatively inexper-

ienced in writing and often lack adequate theoretical foundation in rhetoric, grammar, and usage. And we ask too much of them. They must deal with the Herculean task of improving the writing skills of students bringing papers from all across the curriculum. As teachers of writing we must only remember how our students often puzzle us on an assignment we assigned ourselves to appreciate the complexity of the task faced daily by our tutors. Tutors, even the best ones, have bad days. Even a tutor with the diplomacy skills of Henry Kissinger or Max Kampelman will encounter frequently a student who won't be motivated or placated. Some tutors are not as skilled or well trained as they should be They don't probe hard enough to discover the teacher's expectations. They don't recognize many of the writing pitfalls.

These are all sources of conflict (and there are more besides) between the faculty and the writing center. And while even the most cantankerous of teachers will agree that their students' writing needs to be improved, and while no writing teacher is likely to contend that he has adequate time to address the myriad complexities each of his students encounters whenever the student writes, he may still be unwilling to share the mission of improving his students' writing with the writing center. He may fail to recognize that his own primary aim in assigning writing is to <u>test</u> his student's writing skills--that <u>improvement</u> of skills is a secondary goal. Even if he understands this principle, he may be unwilling to share the task of

teaching writing skills with writing center personnel whom he considers incompetent, meddlesome, or unnecessary to the discipline of teaching.

Responsibility of the Writing Center to the Student

It is incredible that an institution whose mission is so needed, so simple, so easily stated would be so misunderstood, and be so much a focus for contention. The mission of a writing center no less, no more, is to teach students writing skills. Those skills may be remedial intermediate, or advanced. A student may be given little or much help. The assistance may be with grammar, punctuation, correctness, usage, or rhetoric, or a combination of these. Yes, there are and will remain ticks and lanolin in our writing centers. But it seems unreasonable that any well meaning teachers would object to an institution whose aim is to assist and supplement them in the accomplishment of a task that they agree is being left undone, or at least unfinished.